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SMALL CHURCH CONSULTATION HELD AT SEABURY-WESTERN

by Joseph Clayton Neiman

Seabury-Western Theological Seminary

EVANSTON, Ill. -- Changes will be necessary in diocesan and national church appointment and support structures, in the career orientation of young ministers, and in seminary education if the clergy of the Episcopal Church are going to meet effectively the pastoral needs of their small churches.

This was one of several conclusions after a two-day consultation held at Seabury-Western Theological Seminary here between the faculty and representatives of eight Episcopal dioceses. Five of the participants were bishops.

"Our small village churches in the hills of Pennsylvania are truly single-celled or primary communities," the Rt. Rev. Donald Davis, Bishop of Erie, commented. "They just chuckle when they receive these big program packets from the diocese or the national church. They will never do what we want until we accept what and who they are and learn to tailor our approaches to them accordingly."

To provide a theoretical overview of the nature of small churches, the seminary brought in Dr. Carl S. Dudley, professor at McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago and author of the book, Making the Small Church Effective (Abingdon 1978).

"Small churches don't think of themselves as 'small'," Dudley explained. "They are only 'small' when an outsider asks, 'Who are you?' Otherwise they are simply 'the Church' in that place. And small churches don't have problems which need our programmed solutions. They just have people who hurt."

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May 22, 1980

SMALL CHURCH CONSULTATION HELD AT SEABURY-WESTERN

by Joseph Clayton Nelson
Seabury-Western Theological Seminary

EVANSTON, Ill. -- Changes will be necessary in doctrine and authority

church government and support structures, in the correct orientation of young ministers, and in seminary education if the clergy of the Episcopal Church are going to meet a 1980-1990 the personal needs of their small churches.

This was one of several conclusions after a two-day consultation held at Seabury-Western Theological Seminary, held between the faculty and representatives of eight Episcopal dioceses. Five of the participants were bishops.

"Our small village churches in the hills of Pennsylvania are truly single-celled or primitive communities," the Rt. Rev. Donald Davis, Bishop of Erie, commented. "Then last October when they received their first Protestant pastor from the diocese of the national church, they will never be what we want until we people them and who they are and learn to tailor our approaches to their needs."

To provide a theological overview of the nature of small churches, the workshop brought in Dr. Carl S. Dudley, professor at McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago and author of the book, Making the Small Church Effective (Abingdon 1978).

"Small churches don't think of themselves as 'small,'" Dudley explained. "They are only 'small' when an outsider asks, 'Who are you?' Otherwise they are simply 'the Church' in that place. And small churches don't have problems which need no programmed solutions. They just have people who hurt."

The definition of a small congregation varies by denomination, Dudley explained. "It is based on the program expectations of the membership. A Mennonite congregation of 75 would be considered large, while the same number of communicants in a Presbyterian church would rarely be able to attract a clergyperson, or keep a building open for worship and programs. Money is the bottom line for both, depending upon the amount that each congregation feels is essential for survival and adequate for effective ministry."

Dudley noted that small churches are healthy or effective if they are stable in relationship to their environment, if they feel good about themselves, and if they have a constructive relationship with their pastor. Not all small congregations are healthy, Dudley commented, but they are by far the most widespread and durable form of churches in all denominations. "The majority of Protestant churches are small, and they are everywhere," he stressed.

The Rev. Robert Shahan, host for the consultation and head of the recently established small church concentration in ministerial studies at Seabury-Western, used parallel criteria in discussing what makes clergy effective in small churches. "Clergy do well in a small church if they see their career there as stable or long-term, if they feel good about serving in that type of ministry, and if they have a constructive relationship with the parish."

Small churches are not initially interested in growing, Shahan explained, because they will lose the very basis of their identity; i.e., a small caring cell of people who know one another. And yet they feel guilty about their size and small budgets because the diocesan and national church structures, which tend to base programs on the large church model, frustrate them regularly by making demands which can't be met (e.g. monies) or by pushing programs which can't be implemented (e.g. Sunday school curricula). The seminary is seeking, Shahan explained, to prepare clergy for small churches who can affirm the good features of small congregations and tailor ministry accordingly.

While he agreed with the seminary's approach, the Rt. Rev. Robert Anderson, Bishop of Minnesota, questioned whether the family nature of small congregations didn't encourage clergy and people alike to accept uncritically the status quo of their life together. "I wonder if we are not on a collision course in the church today between the evangelism trend, which stresses bringing more and more people to Christ, and the small church emphasis, which resists programming and stresses person-to-person relationships," Bishop Anderson said.

Loneliness in small rural parishes, difficulties with salary and benefit packages, and the lack of models of ministry, other than that of the professional manager, were some of the other problems identified as keeping clergy from being effective in small churches.

Bishops attending the consultation included: the Rt. Rev. Robert Anderson of Minnesota, the Rt. Rev. Donald Davis of Erie, the Rt. Rev. William Dimmick of Northern Michigan, the Rt. Rev. Edward Jones of Indianapolis, and the Rt. Rev. Albert Hillestad of Springfield. Other representatives were the Rev. Lorentho Wooden of Southern Ohio, the Rev. Charles Tachau of Kentucky, and the Rev. Frederick Byrd of Upper South Carolina.

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